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Translation, Conversion and the Containment of Proliferation

Hephzibah Israel

University of Edinburgh

H.Israel@ed.ac.uk

Orchid ID: 0000-0003-0109-6262

School of Literatures

Languages and Cultures

University of Edinburgh

Edinburgh EH8 9LH

Abstract:

This article examines the role of translation in conversion to Christianity in South Asia to argue that recognising translation as a culturally constructed and contingent category entails investigating different definitions of translation at work within different religious cultures. This helps challenge the assumption that a focus on translation is primarily a consideration of equivalence. Rather than take equivalence as universal or normative in examining the role of translation in religious conversion, this article draws attention to alternative definitions and metaphors of translation that are not concerned chiefly with equivalence which complicate the construction of categories such as religion and conversion in the South Asian colonial context. If translation serves as a regime of interpretation by which religious converts construct their relationship with past and present religions, it is important to engage with their diverse characterizations of translation.

Keywords: translation, equivalence, conversion to Christianity, South Asia, Hinduism, Tamil

This article focuses on the constitutive role of translation in articulations of religious conversion by South Asians converting to Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Translation, both linguistic and conceptual, operates at the centre of a corpus of narratives written to effect conversion or by converts to Christianity. Prolific linguistic translation activities on the one hand were a precursor to the experience of conversion. The Bible and Christian literature of varying degrees of importance translated into South Asian languages made Christianity available to a new set of audiences. But these acts of linguistic translation were governed by the work of conceptual translation in the first instance, where key features considered characteristic of the different 'religions' present in South Asia were aligned and measured against Christianity. In the process of translation, the sacred vocabulary and idioms of entire languages were challenged and remoulded to indicate Christian values and the to offer converts careful, limited choices regarding the language in which they could narrate changes in religious beliefs or practices. These twin aspects of translation, linguistic and conceptual, can be said to work together in order to create

the very conditions under which religious conversion could be imagined, enacted and narratively re-constructed.

Religious conversion has been studied from various disciplinary angles, of which anthropology, history, philosophy, and religion intersect most frequently and constructively. Approaching the study of religious conversion from a translation studies perspective, this article seeks to foreground differences in conceptualisations of translation as central to the way in which religious conversion, as perceived and articulated by those 'moving' from one religious framework to another, can be studied. The article will draw on valuable examinations of translation as a conceptual metaphor for cultural transfer as well as scholarship on language practices and religious conversion from linguistic anthropology and anthropology of Christianity (Hanks 2014, Handman 2010, 2015, Schieffelin 2007). Both sets of discussions study the effects of translation on faith communities as a form of "linguistic conversion" (Hanks 2010). Although this attention to translation in studying religious difference and commensurability has been very important to the field, this article argues that for this very reason, it is necessary to unpack what translation means to the different interlocutors coming into contact. I examine the category translation as culturally constructed and contingent, whereby investigating definitions of what translation means to different faith (as well as linguistic) communities, especially against the backdrop of colonial asymmetries of power, offers differences in perspective on how they mobilise translation in sacred contexts and how religious conversion is articulated.

Metaphors we translate by

The meaning of translation is most often treated as universal and given in most academic discussions outside translation studies, with the consequence that it then operates as a normative category in studies examining what is translated, how and to what purpose. Although scholars of religion and religious conversion are perceptive in their critical analysis of the term 'religion,' they are less self-reflexive when referring to translation as more or less a given, self-evident activity of linguistic transfer across two language systems. The discussion therefore often centres on issues of the availability or absence of linguistic equivalents in a new language. With the exception of a few scholars who have been critically engaging with the transformative role of translation in the social forms of religions (Mandair 2009, Seidman 2011), many focus on issues of language transfer *without* challenging the implied concern with equivalence or the metaphor of 'faithful transfer' that translation is associated with. For instance, Giovani Casadio starts his section on translating religion with this definition: "Translating (lit. to 'transfer' or 'carry over' from one place to another) is a way of highlighting the similarity and preserving the difference (2016: 35)" which allows him to argue that "translation seems to enable mediation on a general basis while at the same time allowing individual languages to retain their own

particularity...Cultural translation thus operates as a tool which apparently succeeds in resolving tensions between universalism and relativism" (ibid.). This conflation of linguistic and cultural translation is misleading not least because it works through a metaphorical use of translation where linguistic translation *stands for* cultural translation but his problematic reference to translation in simultaneous relation to universals and particulars is made possible because only the one metaphor of 'carrying across' is taken into account in this analysis. Likewise, Carlos Lopez believes "translation is occupied with capturing universal, equivalent meanings" (2015: 48) and argues that "[i]f by translation we understand simply the communication of the universal meaning of a source-language text by means of an equivalent target language, then translation will necessarily reproduce and reify the very assumptions that we project onto the Other" (2015: 64). Lopez's second statement is valid only if the first were. Approaching translation with the premise that it is mainly about identifying and transferring universal equivalent religious meanings from one language to another immediately restricts our understanding of translation in its full realization and ramifications. Translation is *not* merely about finding linguistic equivalents by "flattening" the discursive contexts (as Lopez would have it, p. 46) within which either the source or target texts are created. If it was, the study of translation would entail reductive comparisons between two or more languages in order to distinguish "adequate" from "inadequate" equivalents and "correct" from "incorrect" translations.

Similarly, the treatment of translation as a study of equivalence has arguably continued to influence debates on conversion to Christianity from a range of beliefs and religious practices within structures of colonial encounters, ranging from Maya conversions to Catholicism (Hanks 2010), to Ewe Pentecostal converts in Ghana (Meyer 1999), to the Bosavi (Schieffelin 2007) or the Guhu-Samane in Papua New Guinea (Handman 2010, 2015). These studies, representative and by no means exhaustive, offer very rich and nuanced analyses of how translation, as an aspect of language ideology in action, has either effected Christian conversion or been mobilised by Christian communities to represent their conversion or transformation, where converts continue to "ritually engage with translations" intertextuality weaving between several available translations (Handman 2010: 577). By and large, however, translation is principally treated in these studies as a consideration of equivalence and of commensurability through equivalence. This has meant that while these scholars are acutely sensitive to subtle differences between cultural interlocutors in terms of their conceptualisation of languages and religious beliefs or practices, they still view translation as a discussion on equivalence across cultural and linguistic difference. Hanks' most recent and fullest engagement with translation in a special issue of *HAU* (2014), offers a compelling account of the constitutive centrality of translation to anthropology because of "*both* how we constitute our objects *and* how we make claims about them" (2). I agree with his latest treatment of translation as a mediating process not just for re-descriptions of cultural difference but as one that structures the

anthropologist's very understanding of cultural difference; however, an assumption that translation is concerned solely with equivalence leads him to argue that it is not the source text that places limits on translatability but that "It is the target language that must meet the baseline requirement of the metalinguistic function of self-interpretation. Failing this, one cannot translate into the language" (28). I therefore wish to push this discussion beyond the continued use of equivalence (and commensurability) as the primary epistemological pair of lenses with which to define translation. Thus, while this body of work continues to inform my engagement with Christian conversion in South Asia in many important ways, in this article I seek to critically engage with this scholarly debate by evaluating translation as a discursive cultural construct and by investigating *differences* in conceptions of translation, and how these have been understood and used in the transmission of religions. What are the implications if we recognize that translation is not calibrated in terms of equivalence and that there are alternate ways of representing the task of translation? If we were to seriously take into account that translation as an epistemological category means very different things to different religious and linguistic cultures, this will also alter the discussion on conversion to Christianity which tends to highlight mainly missionary power and control of colonised, passive peoples.

As I demonstrate in this article, an examination of the different conceptual metaphors underpinning the term translation in the different cultural locations has the potential to challenge current usage of the category translation in the study of religious conversion. Following on from the significant work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) on the centrality of metaphor in human understanding and experiencing of the world where "our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature" (4), I examine conceptual metaphors attached to the term translation. Investigating different conceptual metaphors used to describe translation will indicate what kind of role translation is perceived to play in religious conversion and its study. Lakoff and Johnson in their influential study on the significance of metaphors have argued that

...much of our conceptual system is structured by metaphor. Since we see similarities in terms of the categories of our conceptual system and in terms of the natural kinds of experiences we have (both of which may be metaphorical), it follows that many of the similarities that we perceive are a result of conventional metaphors that are part of our conceptual system. (147)

Language mediates reality in specific ways and metaphors indicate those specific ways in which languages structure our perception of reality. It is relevant to acknowledge here that the structuralist and post-structuralist highlighting of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign and the metaphorical nature of language opened up this line of enquiry as a philosophical and epistemological problem in the first place. More recently, Tom Tweed (2004) has offered a valuable account of how a consideration of metaphor can offer constructive ways of getting beyond the intractable problem of

finding a 'real' definition of religion. Taking a cue from these evaluations of metaphor as instrumental in its capacity to structure thought, I point to the importance of asking what evaluative or normative effect metaphors of *translation*, especially of translation as equivalence, have on the way religions and religious difference or conversion are interpreted. As I will show later in the article, several scholars have provided compelling arguments for European constructions of religions in India (Sweetman 2003, Numark 2011, Lopez 2015). But if one were to approach the long-running debate regarding how a range of beliefs and practices were constructed as 'religion' during the colonial encounter from a translation perspective, we need to address the critical question whether Eurocentric conceptualisations of *translation* carried across and sustained Eurocentric conceptual frameworks of 'religion' into South Asian cultures. Since translation was intrinsic to the way religions began to be viewed, compared and categorized in colonial India: whether its concepts were perceived as 'translatable' into Indian languages often determined whether a religion was deemed a 'Religion' by European scholars. This translation history involving the framing of Hindu, Jain, Sikh or Zoroastrian traditions into a "meaningful" form, that is, 'religion,' allows us to identify the constitutive role of translation in constructing, restructuring or inventing religion as well as religious conversion by working through metaphors of equivalence. While there is ample evidence for the direction of travel of translation metaphors from Europe to South Asia, what I am proposing to do here is consider alternative metaphors for translation that were available in South Asia in order to examine whether these could explain the different notions and articulations of religious conversion, including a resistance to the neat categorisation of religions, expressed in autobiographical accounts of conversion to Christianity.

Differences in conceptual metaphors underpinning translation in different language and religious settings can inform examinations of religious conversion to Christianity. Of course, the term 'conversion' itself often functions as a popular conceptual metaphor to refer to linguistic translation. But it is a term that is equally associated with religious transformation. When the same term 'conversion' is used to refer both to linguistic translation and religious conversion, it invites a discussion of what makes this overlap possible and what part, if any, the concept of equivalence plays here.

'Equal but different'—is crucial for a transfer to be conceived and to be acted upon. For instance, for translation to be considered a tenable act between languages, these must be recognized as languages in the first place: that is, commensurable as social sign systems but necessarily different sign systems. Similarly, religions that insist on conversion, also insist on the differences between themselves and other religions, but in this very process such religions also recognize others as belonging to the category 'religion' (and not 'superstition' or 'idolatry'). Religious conversion apparently entails movement (like 'translation,' a conceptual metaphor that I will review in the following section) from x to y religion. On the one hand, an individual

must recognize their belonging to a specific, stable and discrete category (let's call it religion x), a position from which they must make the conceptual leap to identify a separate discrete, stable category (religion y), also recognizable in some form as 'religion' and yet sufficiently different from religion x. This difference needs to be comprehended and negotiated with in such a way that the individual then conceives that it is possible to engage with and move towards religion y. After all, why bother converting if x and y religions were identical? If the conceptual metaphor of translation as "carrying across" is applied here, this "carrying across" of the self gestures towards acts of textual translation where similarly 'something' (usually an essence or meaning) is mysteriously extracted intact from the words uttered in a specific language, transported across and embodied in a new set of words within a different linguistic sign system. In standard translation studies terminology, this is the relationship between source text, meaning and target text.

In the following section, I examine two types of translation practices that can be identified in relation to religious conversion to Christianity in South Asia: these are translation projects, undertaken to effect conversion and conversely translations undertaken by converts to Christianity. I show different articulations of conversion that challenge the notion of complete 'transfer' where the converts do not represent themselves as moving across from one discrete linguistic domain associated with one religion to another linguistic domain linked to a different religion. Rather than transferring ('converting' or 'translating') from one religion to another, conversion is imagined as acquiring additional layers of religious signification; a proliferation of possible identities rather than choosing one over another. The (self)representation of religious conversion as a simultaneous embrace of multiple gods, multiple religious traditions, multiple sacred vocabularies and significations accepted as valid or even tenable is however tricky in the case of conversions to Protestant Christianity. Examining some differences in idioms used for translation will also illuminate different representations of conversion to Christianity in South Asia.

Conceptualizing "Translation": saintly bones or human avatars?

So how can we unpack the term translation and what are some historic and current perceptions regarding what it is that translation does? I begin with an examination of one of the conceptual metaphors that form the basis for the term "translation" in the European context since this at present governs the discourse on translation. As has been pointed out in numerous studies of translation, the Latin root of the English word, is *translatio* or 'transporting' and is derived from the verb participle *transfere* or 'to carry over.' But what is it that is being transported or carried over? This question has been central to the development of translation studies as a discipline, with emphasis placed on either 'meaning' or 'form.' But there is a further layer to this metaphor of transportation if we take into account its earliest use in the Christian context. Talal Asad (1995: 325-26) first drew attention to the location of the term translation in Christian ecclesiastical contexts and to the transfer of relics and clerics

from one site or office to another. Translation in its earliest usage referred not to linguistic transfer but to the movement of objects (relics or bones of saints) and individuals who apparently carried with them their defining sacred quality. It is from this usage that the metaphor of carrying across shaped understandings of linguistic translation.

The translation scholar Maria Tymoczko (2010) has argued further that the term's metaphorical link with sacred relics explains one of two strands that characterize Western conceptualizations of translation in formal terms as "*word for word*" (as opposed to the other Classical strand "*sense for sense*" which privileged 'free' translations that carried across meaning). She suggests that the Christian conception of translation privileges form and word because it presents a link both to Christ's 'words' as well as Christ as an embodiment of God's word. According to Tymoczko, "Because this biblical translation resulted in the Latin equation of the word (*verbum*) with God (*deus*) and hence with Christ, in Western Europe to translate the word (*verbum*) was tantamount to translating Christ" (Tymoczko 2010: 133). Emerging from this concept, linguistic transfer was then conceived of as evoking, and importantly, simulating the literal 'translation' or transfer of the relics of saints from one sacred site to another (Tymoczko 2010). With this metaphorical equation of Christ with 'word', words and their translation had become associated with the divine and with ideas of biblical inimitability. Hence the emphasis on close, 'faithful' and 'equivalent' translations of the original that 'preserved' the original or source text. These Christian conceptual metaphors have figured largely as the basis for this conceptual strand in understanding or undertaking linguistic translation within Western intellectual history.

Asad and Tymoczko's recovery of previous usages of this term in sacred contexts offers an insight into the possible imbrications that the category translation encapsulates, one where what would usually be considered a 'secular' concept reveals a deeply sacred lineage. It is the bones of saints, connecting the human to a non-human world, imbued with magic and power, eternally pointing to something beyond themselves that conceptually link translation and the Christian sacred. It is no wonder that the central concern in Western traditions of thinking about translation from medieval times—authenticity, equivalence, faithfulness, and translation as mechanical (and not creative) act—parallel the concerns of the early medieval church that 'authentic' relics were fully and faithfully identified and moved across intact from one site to another. Incidentally, this also assigns translation a rather mechanical and secondary role in comparison with the primary and creative divine act of breathing life into bones (dry or otherwise) as seen in the Old Testament books of Genesis 1 and 2 and Ezekiel 37. This binary distinction can be extended from divine versus human action to indicate 'author' versus 'translator.' In this context, what is considered 'translation,' and by implication what is categorized as 'translatable' or 'untranslatable,' gets defined by a very specific dichotomy developed from within a

Christian framework. This should not in itself pose a problem except that this conceptual metaphor of carrying faithfully across, where faithful implies comprehensive, complete, transfer is not designated as a 'Western' concept of translation but applied as a universal metaphor to translation across any language pair, regardless of whether other notions of translation may already be present there. Somewhere along the line, the term's conceptual ancestors were forgotten, but what remained was the emphasis on equivalence and faithfulness fuelled further by the exigencies of Bible translation. More notably, just as the saints' bones never lost their sacrality wherever they moved, or indeed imbued each new physical location with their other-worldly power, the 'essence' or the meaning of a text could apparently be transferred to new languages, to new texts and audiences. Generating a circular argument, the Bible as the Word of God could then be considered 'translatable' into any human language. At this point, linguistic universalism and translatability come together to maintain or even enforce the establishing of equivalence as central to translation.

Now let us consider other conceptual trajectories for translation, and as this article focuses on religious conversions to Christianity in South Asia, in South Asian cultural and linguistic settings. That the concept of translation in the South Asian context has developed along distinctly different lines has been written about by several scholars working with South languages and literatures. The broad consensus in the Indian academia (and most forcefully stated by Trivedi 2006) is that a fixation with authenticity, equivalence, faithfulness, as mechanical (and not creative) act has had little conceptual bearing in the Indian intellectual and literary histories but one that was introduced after European contact. Evidence cited from the terminology available in several languages stress a more creative transmission of texts from one language to another, even when these terms began to be used as Indian language translations of the English term 'translation' from the late nineteenth century onwards. To give an example from two of the Indian languages I work with, Tamil and Hindi, translation began most commonly to be denoted by terms such as 'molipeyarttal' or 'moliakum' in Tamil and in the Hindi, amongst the terms, 'rupantar,' 'bhashantar,' 'bhavanuvad,' and 'anuvad,' the last began to be used as the primary term for translation. Molipeyarttal, is a construction from two words put together, moli i.e. language and peyarttal referring to a range of actions: to form and shape, to redeem, to recover, or to wrench by force. While together they are taken to refer to the 'transfer' of meaning from one language to another, the conceptual range of meanings associated with the verb peyarttal, emphasize difference and transformation rather than equivalence and helps us unpack the way translation has been conceived in the Tamil literary imagination prior to its construction. It emphasizes the active and creative, the shaping power of translation as well as its capacity to dismantle and recover. 'Moliakum,' literally 'make language' lays emphasis on the process of 'making' (akum) rather than faithful imitation. The Hindi and Sanskrit constructions such as 'anuvad' which began to be used to refer to translation from the

nineteenth century (Friedlander 2011) gradually became the standard term for translation; a similar trajectory can be glimpsed in other North Indian languages such as the Bengali and Gujarati (Cort 2015). While ‘rupantar’ means “to change form”, highlighting not so much a transfer across languages but a recognition that change in language would change the very form of the first illocutionary act, ‘anuvad’ denotes, to repeat after or to respond. Using anuvad to denote the work of translation suggests that the translation could be conceived as an answer to the call of the original. *Chayya* (shadow) has been suggested by Das (1995) as a term that comes close to what translation does in the South Asian context, usually narrative prose retelling of the main outlines of a poetic text in another language. In none of these terms when parsed do we glimpse an anxiety regarding equivalence or authenticity, rather admission of the kinds of transformation made possible in the process of textual transmission. A relationship between source and target texts is certainly recognized in these languages but this is conceptualised not in terms of semantic equivalence but as a complementary relationship between texts where equivalence does not matter.

The terms for translation in most modern Indian languages and especially in the Tamil, Hindi and Sanskrit contexts under consideration here suggest that literary translation at least was conceived as a *creative* act, where the translator makes visible something that was obscured by an unknown language. The translator imitates to produce something that resembles the old but acquires significance as a *fresh* work of art, not as a ‘faithful’ or equivalent translation. To state that one has translated from an existing text indicated to the audience not a slavish reiteration in another language, but an allegiance to a particular literary or religious tradition, so much so that until the nineteenth century, it was quite common for new poets to claim that their original pieces of writings were ‘translations’, to be instantly recognized as fitting within a particular representative tradition. Indian literary and translation studies scholars by and large prefer the term ‘transcreation’ to translation as more accurate for the kinds of textual transmissions that can be observed in the subcontinent. Chandrani Chatterjee in a recent lecture¹ on available terminology on translation suggested instead ‘utprekshita’ from the Sanskrit as more appropriately denoting resemblance (rather than representation), where the relationship between two texts is “*as if* one were the other.” Here metaphor is mobilised not to emphasise or assert equivalence but to suggest the possibility of similarity, while all the time recognizing that two are not meant to be identical or equivalent.

This appears to be the predominant sense in which the more literary renderings of religious literature translated across Indian languages. What has often been cited as cause for celebration, for instance, is that every ‘translation’ or version of the *Ramayana*, a central Hindu epic, in any one of the Indian languages is markedly *different* in story, in texture and sensibility, and plot and structure, to the extent that there have been instances where the ‘villainous’ Ravana of some narratives features as epic hero in other parts of the sub-continent. Equivalence is an aspect that does not

feature very prominently in discussions of the Ramayana. Ironically, what is celebrated by South Asian scholars, especially A.K. Ramanujan (1991), is the difference between the several language version texts rather than strict adherence or equivalence to its source. This proliferation of interpretations through translation is read by Ramanujan and others² as representing different ways of conceptualising and structuring the normative role of the Rama figure, and differences in social ordering for new audiences. However, it would serve well to be more cautious with such celebrations of literary creativeness in the Hindu context since translations of other sacred texts considered 'scripture' for ritual purposes by Brahmanical Hinduism, in particular the *Vedas*, were not as open to translation in the first place. Nevertheless, whether translation is undertaken or proscribed, the concept of equivalence is not central to definitions of translation. I suggest that here, instead of a 'source text' and its translation, it would seem more appropriate to refer to an 'initiating text' and its several complementary versions. Here, translations are expected to be different, taking the initiating text in new directions and developing new modes of interacting or dialoguing ('anuvad') with it. In this case, not only is there a difference in language (effects of linguistic translation) but there is a difference in conception, where translation is a re-conception of the initiating text highlighting and detailing some aspects over others but is not expected to function as an equivalent repetition of a text in another language.

Further, there are different considerations at play in relation to translation within other religious and literary traditions in India. Tschacher (2011) for instance has offered convincing evidence of the use of the Tamil term 'urai' to denote translation by Tamil Islamic scholars. Urai, which is predominantly considered a term for explanation or commentary, is used to describe a translation process that involved perhaps initially an oral explanation of an Arabic text in Tami which subsequently served as a basis for the composition of an Islamic Tamil Kappiyam or epic poem. Remarking that "the clear articulation of the notion of 'translation' as 'commentary' [which] seems to set Islamic Tamil literature apart from its non-Islamic counterpart" is often overlooked, Tschacher asks whether "[o]ne might even argue that the notion of 'translation' as 'commentary' was derived from the idea that the Quran could not be translated into any language, while one might legitimately produce a commentary of the Quran in another language..." (Tschacher 2011: 40). Commentary is not conceptualised in terms of equivalence. Goldman (1992) and Patel (2011) have also drawn attention to the complex, triangular relationship between Sanskrit texts, Sanskrit commentaries and regional language translations in medieval textual transmission where they function not as much as "translation as commentary" but as distinct textual responses, albeit functioning either in complementary or competing fashion. It seems then that these several conceptions of translation at play in the South Asian context, from re-creation to prohibition, and arising from different *religious* contexts, have offered little by way of prescription regarding equivalence in any statements on translation.

From these few examples above, it is evident that although the conceptual category translation displays a range of connotations in South Asia, one-to-one equivalence has not been central to these. In the encounters between European and South Asian interlocutors from the late seventeenth century onwards, these different conceptualisations of translation also came into contact with each other, with a new emphasis on equivalence and faithfulness in translation. No wonder then that both British missionaries and colonial administrators bemoaned what they saw as the Indian inability to comprehend translation as equivalence. Taking for granted that translation as equivalence was self-evident truth, the 'non-equivalent' translations produced by Indian language scholars³ was interpreted as proof of the 'Indian character' as in essence dishonest and unfaithful. The Indian pundit or scholar was constituted as unreliable because he worked with a conceptualisation of translation without reference to equivalence. The two notions of translation were interpreted as incommensurate.

These two sets of conceptualisations of translation, arising from different linguistic as well as religious contexts, continued to interact with each other in translations of South Asian texts into European languages and rendering European language texts in South Asian languages. When texts were identified as sacred and associated with a specific faith community, 'other' religions were first encountered in the process of translation as much as through translated texts. Given this scenario, it is valuable to take into account that when sacred texts were translated to attract readers to Christianity, it is not simply a case of identifying the role of linguistic equivalence but also whether the different conceptions of translation and what it entailed for the different religious communities had a part to play in the entire process. In these circumstances, therefore, rather than examine whether linguistic equivalence was desirable or possible, it is pertinent to investigate some ways by which equivalence of religious concepts was assumed, denied or rendered redundant in order to facilitate or justify linguistic equivalence and what purpose this may serve.

Conceptualizing religious conversion: re-tracing the constitutive role of translation

To understand how conversion to Christianity was represented in different ways in South Asia, it would be useful to first consider what I broadly term 'the European translation of religion in South Asia' by way of context. Not least because ideas of European Christianity crystallised further as a result of European encounters with the religions observed in India. This is a factor worth emphasizing since the "impact" of colonial encounter is usually computed and quantified in terms of a unidirectional flow, from European coloniser to the colonised South Asian. But not only were religions 'discovered' outside Europe compared to the religions as they were observed within Europe and categorised on an evolutionary scale, such comparisons also influenced the conceptualisation of the term 'religion' within European debates from

the Enlightenment onwards.⁴ It is in this framework of the evolving discourse on religion in enlightenment Europe, that translation becomes operative as vital to the project of knowledge production in and about South Asia. The category 'religion' was very much in the making during and post Enlightenment,⁵ acquiring new conceptual layers in the very process of linguistic translation. Coinciding with early periods of contact with Asia, through Arabic translations in the Middle East, linguistic translation played an important role in the construction, definition and transportation of knowledge about perceived religions beyond Europe. The intense, almost voyeuristic interest in religions beyond the Christian pale, and examinations of how exactly Christianity differed from other observable phenomenon also led to a solidifying of its boundaries.

Discursive constructions of "religion": establishing 'equivalence'?

The translation of religions occurred in both directions, of those present in India and those perceived as religions entering India after the arrival of Portuguese Catholic missionaries on its shores in the mid 16th century, to the eighteenth-century German Protestants and finally to the nineteenth-century British Protestant missionaries.⁶ In parallel, translations undertaken by orientalist scholars, British, French and German Indologists, powerfully represented selected sacred and philosophical texts as key to understanding on the one hand, the religions of South Asia, in particular, the Hindu, Buddhist and Zoroastrian 'religions'⁷ and on the other, introduced epistemic shifts in the way 'religion' was understood in European intellectual circles. Of the many translation projects, perhaps the most spectacular was Max Müller's *The Sacred Books of the East* (1879–1910), involving a team of translators working with different languages and religious traditions. This project is the apogee of the kind of comparative scholarship that for at least two hundred years or more had sought to link through translation an examination of languages with that of religions and their communities.⁸

Translation projects, individual or collective, sympathetic or hostile, by Europeans and Indians, remained central to the accumulation of discursive statements and knowledge of the religions of South Asia. There are broadly three different kinds of translation activities that can be identified in the religious context, translations of texts considered sacred in Indian languages into European in order to understand the beliefs and religious practices of the peoples encountered, translation of the Bible and Christian literatures from European languages into Indian undertaken by Europeans, and the literary writings and translations of Indians who converted to Christianity. In the first set of translations, the task of linguistic translation worked to develop conceptual religious 'equivalents' producing some key categories, such as 'Hinduism',⁹ 'dharma',¹⁰ and 'shraddha'¹¹ which became associated with religions in India. In fact, translation, both of the linguistic and conceptual kind, was central to the development of 'Hindu' as a key religious category, and to a shift from earlier uses of generic terms

such as 'heathenism' or 'paganism' which had been placed bottom most in a hierarchy of 'world religions.' However, Will Sweetman's examination of seventeenth and eighteenth century writings, that of the English chaplain to the East India Company ship bound for India Henry Lord's *A Display of Two Forraigne Sects in the East India* (1630), the Dutch Calvinist minister, Abraham Roger's *De Open-Duere tot het Verborgten Heydendom [The Open door to hitherto Concealed Heathenism]* (1651) and the German Pietist missionary in South India, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg's *Malabarisches Heidenthum* (written 1711 and published in 1926) and the *Genealogie der Malabarischen Götter* (written 1713, published in 1791) reveal that the three Protestant accounts like their Jesuit counterparts in India show an awareness of a plurality of religious beliefs and practices rather than a unified or systematic religion 'Hinduism.' In these early writings, Sweetman delineates three different terms used by each with a certain degree of ambiguity. Lord uses the term 'Banian,'¹² Roger 'Bramines,' and Ziegenbalg uses the terms 'Malabarisch' and 'Heidenthum.' In each case, the writer uses just the one word to point in multiple directions—a people, a region and a religion—as if to contain these many aspects in a single term.

Of these, Ziegenbalg is worth discussing further as a missionary-translator who offers the greatest detail regarding his direct correspondence with Tamils on their beliefs and practices. Although Sweetman gives a very creditable account of this early stage of European constructions of Hinduism, he does not discuss Ziegenbalg's function as a translator who was translating Tamil sacred texts and written as well as conversational exchanges held in Tamil and Portuguese into German. In his Introduction to *Malabarisches Heidenthum*, Ziegenbalg tells his readers that he has quoted several passages from the Tamil books: "I decided to read once again the [religious] books of the Tamils, and summarise their teaching....This book presents briefly the important teachings of their religious beliefs and manifold efforts to attain salvation, and includes other areas of belief and life. The details are presented briefly and truly as they are found in their own books [Tamil]" (trans. Jeyaraj 2006: 64-65). Ziegenbalg's early eighteenth-century translation relying directly on Tamil sources refracts the early discourse on religions in India in interesting ways. There is a visible slipperiness of language use in Ziegenbalg's accounts of South India that calls attention to an equivocation informing his translation. Ziegenbalg uses the one term 'Malabarisch' to denote a territory (*Malabarische landgemeine*), a people (*Malabarische*), their gods (*Malabarische Götter*), ethics (*Malabaraische Sittenlehre*) and language (the *malabarische Sprache, Namen und Wörter*). He uses *Malabarische* for the Tamil language here, even though from other correspondence from the same year, it is possible to construe that he is aware of the term 'Damulian' [Tamil] to denote a specific language. After all his *Grammatica Damulica* published in 1716 refers to the "Lingua Damulica." Further, although Ziegenbalg clearly communicates in Tamil with numerous Tamils, via letters and conversations,¹³ he translates these into German as *Malabarische Correspondenz* (for the Halle Reports). He reviewed over a hundred books in *Bibliotheca Malabarica* (edited and published in 1880 by Wilhelm Germann,

a later German missionary in South India), with apparently a genuine desire to understand their religious beliefs and practices and certainly with a degree of admiration. Yet, by *translating* different topics from their correspondence using the terms ‘Malabarisch’ and ‘Heidenthum,’ Ziegenbalg is superimposing European categories that presuppose what a ‘Malabarian Heathenism’ (or, should I say, ‘religion’?) might have meant to the Tamils themselves. Such that in the very act of *translating* into German what South Indians Tamils were saying about their gods, Ziegenbalg was neither simply adding a new layer of meaning nor distorting what was first spoken or written in Tamil but constructing the term ‘Malabarian’ to function as a single signifier of multiple different aspects of their religion and culture. While Ziegenbalg does attempt to engage with the number of visible differences between the various religious groups as Sweetman points out, Ziegenbalg’s insistence on repeating the single term ‘Malabarisch’ to refer to a range of distinct categories works by creating a single conceptual translation space that brings it into textual existence and develops into a structuring discourse on South India. This multi-purpose category Malabarian is as yet an unknown category, both to his German audience *and* to his Tamil interlocutors, and its very non-specificity could point in any number of different directions. When this one term is pressed into action to represent several referents, we see a linguistic construction that conceptually effaces different features of the object of inquiry, in this case different sets of beliefs and practices of a people, speaking the Tamil language, living in South India. The linguistic construct ‘Malabarisch’ discursively stands in for and locks together a range of disparate categories as equal: religion, race and language at the very least.

Similarly, in much of the Orientalist and missionary scholarship there are several stages to denoting non-European religions. The unspecific category ‘heathen’ applied to all alien views, flagged up fundamental differences (Ziegenbalg for instance distinguishes between Muslims and heathens). This develops into associations with geographic categories such as Malabarian or Hindoo such that until the late eighteenth century, the term ‘Hindoo’ spelt with a double ‘o’ was used to refer to people associated with a geographical territory rather than religion: ‘the Hindoo’ for instance rather than the ‘Indian’. It was only towards the end of the eighteenth century that the term Hindooism began to be used as a category that represented the collective religious beliefs of a majority of the South Asians and gradually replaced the use of Heathenism. Geoffrey Oddie contends that Charles Grant was “one of the first Europeans to use the term Hindooism in both his private and semi-official correspondence” from 1787 onwards, thus “popularising the term in evangelical, missionary and official circles” (2006: 71-72). “The Hindu religion, having acquired its own special name, was now seen even more clearly as the obverse of Christianity, as a distinctive and unified religious ‘system,’ with clear boundaries marking it off from Christianity and other religions” (2006: 72). This conceptual shift from a populace occupying a territory to religion again occurs through the translation projects of scholars and missionaries, which involved translating Hindu scriptures and

commentary traditions into European languages as well as the translation of the Bible into Indian languages. Further, as Mitch Numark's study of translations by key Scottish missionaries based in Bombay from the 1830s onwards rightly demonstrates, not only Hindu but Zoroastrian, Jain, and Buddhist texts and inscriptions further "helped to pave the way for the comparative study of religion to begin in earnest" (2011: 473). Such linguistic constructs reveal the constitutive role that colonial, missionary translation played in constructing categories of and for religions in South Asia.

The second set of translations relate to the translation history of the Bible and related Protestant texts into South Asian languages which offer a different but related context wherein translation choices have influenced the construction of a Christian register in the several languages. The largely held opinion in Protestant missionary circles was that a faithful and close translation of the Bible, would effect the conversion of Indians, without requiring any other intervention. Much of the debate on translation in these projects involved the question whether there were conceptual 'equivalents' between European and South Asian languages. On the face of it, Protestant missionary translators were always in search of linguistic equivalents, often bemoaning the lack of appropriate equivalents in all the languages. Yet, an in-depth study of the terminology used in the Tamil translations of the Bible (Israel 2011) reveals that the translators sometimes claimed a lack of linguistic equivalence as this allowed them to argue a corresponding lack of conceptual equivalence between Protestant Christianity and forms of Tamil Hinduism. To illustrate, I will give one example from the translation project of the Bible into Tamil: the term *katavul*. This was an existing Tamil term that most closely captured the Protestant concept of a monotheistic, absolute god, formless and without gender but it was also the one term that was kept out of the Tamil Bible for over two hundred years (from the early 1700s to the early decades of the 1900s). Instead, neologisms were invented by combining or manipulating existing terms as freshly established conceptual equivalents to address this perceived 'lack' in Tamil Hinduism. This may seem counter-intuitive: after all what translator worth their salt avoids an existing linguistic 'equivalent' for two hundred years while bemoaning the necessity of having to create entirely new equivalents? I have argued elsewhere (Israel 2011) that this translation strategy was deliberate. For Protestant missionary translators to have used the word *katavul* in the Bible would have meant acknowledging that the Tamil-speaking communities had conceptualised a monotheistic, absolute god prior to their contact with Christianity which they could express perfectly well in Tamil. Recognizing this might have meant conceding that there was a level of commensurability between the religious traditions of Protestant Christianity and Tamil Hinduism, to a degree that rendered them conceptually and uncomfortably similar. While translation may have been the means by which religions of India were constructed as 'religions,' translation was also the means by which religions other than Protestant Christianity were shown to be its conceptually inferior 'Other'. By refusing to adopt existing close 'equivalents' of key concepts such as a monotheistic, absolute God, Protestant missionary translators

could represent Tamil Hinduism as theologically less sophisticated in comparison to Protestant Christianity, thus demonstrating a sound rationale for converting from Tamil Hinduism. Translation is deployed here as an instrument for establishing non-equivalence between religious concepts to promote religious conversion under the very guise of a hunt for equivalence.

Translation and Conversion

The relationship between such textual translations and religious conversion in the Christian context is strengthened by the metaphor of transfer, although the transfer is imagined as working simultaneously in opposite directions. While Christian meaning is faithfully carried across from source text and culture to target text and culture, the effect of this translation is meant to induce movement of the converted faithful from target to source religious culture. If the effects of the above translation projects were therefore intended to lead to religious conversion amongst Hindus, it is useful to ask the question, 'what does religious conversion mean in Hinduism?' and how did this influence the way Hindu converts to Christianity represented their conversion.

Conversion in Hinduism is notoriously difficult to describe, possibly as difficult as the category Hinduism. A Hindu may turn to any god, saint or guru temporarily or permanently without losing their identity as a Hindu. There are no established prescribed rituals sanctifying conversion *into* Hinduism.¹⁴ The late nineteenth century invention of 'shuddhi rights' leading to 'ghar wapsi,' of the twentieth century to bring converts out of Hinduism back under its roof is a relatively recent development in response to the exclusive claims of other proselytising religions in India, in particular Christianity and Islam.¹⁵ But interestingly one can cease to be a Hindu not so much by 'loss of faith' in a particular divinity but by disobeying rules of ritual caste purity. However, loss of caste status was considered more irrevocable than the loss of religion and held more serious consequences than the adoption of a new god. Caste status determined one's ritual, familial and social place in this world. However, faith in the power of extra gods or exchanging one god for another did not necessarily cause an individual to lose caste rather it was going against caste rules that was by far condemned. No wonder, many converts to Christianity were advised by their families that they could 'believe in' whoever they wanted, choose any god as long as they did not perform any ritually impure actions—for instance, eat or drink with those belonging to a lower caste—which would certainly entail their losing caste.¹⁶ A change in inner faith was not interpreted as 'betrayal' but disobeying caste regulations was.

Religious studies scholars have remarked on the slipperiness of the concept of conversion in Hinduism with its claim that it is an "inclusive" religion that does not usually require the abandonment of previous affiliations: Michael Carrithers calls this the religious cosmopolitanism of South Asia: i.e. an "ability to be enthused by now one religious figure and now another, and perhaps throughout to maintain worship of a

third, the kuladevata (or family deity)” (2000: 832). Worshipping a range of gods on an expanding (including gods from other ‘religions’) or retracting spectrum accompanied by devotion to one as the main lord without precluding any of the others is considered common practice. The many eclectic crossovers between saints of different ilk between fluid, shifting sectarian boundaries is well document in anthropological, historical and religious studies scholarship on South Asia (Balyly 1989, Cort 1988, Dundas 1992, Robinson and Clarke 2003) which renders conversion as a rejection of one religion in favour of turning to another a meaningless concept. However, there have been historic disputes over conversion attesting to periods of social and political contests for power which tightened such porous borders. This policing of boundaries did at times demand the rejection of one god in favour of another. A good example of this is apparent in the poems of conversion composed by the sixth-century Tamil Saivite poet, Appar, who had first ‘converted’ to the Jain faith and then famously recanted to sing praises to Siva once again.¹⁷ But such literature of religious conversion, of turning decisively away from a particular god or path is indeed rare.

In this scenario, the missionary insistence that Indians entirely reject previous religious beliefs to join the Christian ‘fold’ created difficulties. This involved a “movement across,” both in the spiritual and conceptual as well as in the social and bodily senses.¹⁸ Conversions to Christianity were considered genuine or false on the basis of converts’ willingness to make this move in all respects. South Asian converts to Christianity, with this category referring to individuals along the whole conversion spectrum (from those who claimed they had experienced an inward change but did not wish to undergo any formal rituals of conversion, to those who took baptism but kept their Christian conversion secret, to those who themselves became open and active missionaries and church ministers seeking to convert others) expressed their ‘conversion’ in a multitude of ways that did not coincide with what their missionaries required of them. Rather than metaphorically moving across from one religious context to another, many converts expressed a convergence of several religious interests, most often visibly in their use of language.¹⁹

A brief consideration of a few key metaphors used for the concept of ‘conversion’ will indicate some of the differences in perspective. Spiritual moves are commonly constructed spatially in English in the Christian context. In English, we can withdraw into the ‘inner life’ to speculate on and examine our ‘outer,’ public self. Metaphors that offer spatial orientation through orienting metaphors are important as Lakoff and Johnson (1980:14) point out. Spatial oppositions are therefore important:²⁰ religious life may often be expressed in spatial terms—following the path of the righteous, not going astray; rising up or falling down, or falling into sin. Religious leaders feature as shepherds who lead ‘the way’ through to the other side, beyond this material world and to the real world that matters. The Christian definition of conversion predominantly entails the giving up of one space to adopt another. The more radical the move, the more authentic the conversion would seem. The

metaphors of 'path' or 'way' are used in several Indian languages too, including the Tamil ('marg' or 'markkam' from the Sanskrit root) but to refer to religion itself rather than in the sense of going towards or astray from a religion.

"To convert," in the sense of religious transformation or radical change that is commonly used in English, does not have an 'equivalent' linguistic term in most Indian languages. While terms for convert in the sense of 'to change' or 'alter' exist, the specific sense of religious conversion enters most languages only with missionary efforts to codify and systematize Indian languages for translation purposes: so for instance, an eighteenth century Tamil-English dictionary compiled in 1779 by the German missionary Johann Phillip Fabricius cites '*kunam*' as 'good character,' and '*kunapatukiratu*' as 'to cure,' or 'to recover' but in later editions of the same dictionary, the term is marked as 'Christian usage' and given the meaning "to repent" and *kunappattavan* as "a convert". In a list of theological terms compiled by Mill and commented on by Wilson (1830), the terms convert and conversion are absent. This construction brings together the idea of conversion with that of someone who has "acquired good character" or has been "cured" of some illness. Such constructions of linguistic equivalents through dual-language dictionaries indicate the setting up of conceptual equivalence to add inflections of Christian understandings of conversion. In the Sanskrit, which possesses the largest number of pre-modern Indian religious texts, the term "pratibodhita" to refer to conversion, refers to 'one who is awakened' or 'who has recovered consciousness'. Paul Dundas, discussing this term in the context of medieval moves to Jainism, suggests that this term "implies...a less radical transition than the term 'conversion', the re-emergence of what has been temporarily obscured, rather than a turning to what is completely new" (2003: 128). Conversion would here appear not as "moving across" religious boundaries but re-orienting oneself or strengthening a different facet of oneself in the light of another. However, the effect of missionary linguistics was such that new terms had to be invented in South Asian languages as 'equivalents' for Christian concepts that were emphasized as unique to it.

How did nineteenth-century religious converts to Christianity in India represent their past religious affiliations in their writing: was it conceptualized as a move away from 'religion,' 'superstition,' 'error,' 'sin,' or 'darkness'? The use of each of these terms has particular implications regarding how the relationship between the two 'religions' is conceived. These several phrases appear in South Asians writing about their conversion to Christianity. Some use the metaphor of 'markkam' [Tamil lit. meaning 'way,' but usually used to refer to religious persuasion] for both: '*intu markkam*' [Hindu way or religion] and '*kiristu markkam*' [Christian religion]. Thomas Katirvel Nayanar's Tamil autobiography (1938) for instance, offers a comparative critique of the '*intu markkam*' and '*kiristu markkam*' to justify his conversion but his use of the same term markkam to indicate both Hindu and Christian beliefs points to the recognition of both as belonging to the same category, religion. While he refers to

an acquaintance critical of Christianity as ‘Siva baktan’ he also uses the term ‘Kiristu baktan’ for himself, where baktan [lit. devotee of] is derived from the Tamil bhakti traditions that discomfited nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries for various reasons.²¹ He also uses the term ‘katavul’ throughout his autobiography to refer to god, both Hindu and Christian, thus bringing back into his vocabulary a term that had been kept out of the Tamil Bible for decades. Furthermore, in many autobiographical accounts of conversion translated into English, there is a predominance of the use of terms such as ‘Hindu superstition’ or ‘error’ which are opposed to the term ‘Christian religion’ which indicates that these may have been choices made by translators and editors (often European missionaries) who preferred to draw a starker contrast between the convert’s Hindu past and their Christian present²² but it is difficult to reach a conclusive assessment without access to the source Indian language autobiographies which have not usually survived in the archives.²³

Recognizing Translations produced by converts to Christianity

There were broadly two other types of translation undertaken by Indian writers, poets and intellectuals who had converted to Christianity. There was new interest in the translation of religious materials, both inter-lingual translation, often in advisory capacity to missionary translation projects and intra-lingual translations. Of these the latter are of particular interest to this debate as, whether across two or more languages or within the same language, they tended to conceptually translate Protestant Christianity into the culturally resonant linguistic registers of the religious literatures they were familiar with. Although they had travelled across into the religious category ‘Christianity’, they felt most comfortable representing their transition through a language register taken from Hindu literature, presenting a form of linguistic resistance.

Some developed theological arguments (Krishna Mohan Banerjea 1813-1884, Brahmabandhay Upadhyay 1861-1907, Pandipeddi Chenchiah, 1886-1959, Vengal Chakkarai 1887-19, Keshab Chunder Sen 1838-1884, Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai 1895-1967) that sought to reinvigorate Christian literature available in India with concepts taken from several strands of the Hindu discourse represented through key terms re-used in the Christian context. Part of the “Rethinking Christianity group” in early twentieth-century Madras, several theologians deliberately employed terms such as ‘bhakta marga,’ ‘kiristu avatara,’ ‘khritadvaita,’ ‘antaryamin,’ ‘advaita,’ ‘moksha,’ ‘mahasakti,’ ‘prajapati,’ ‘viskarma,’ ‘saccidananda’ and so on in their writing in order to translate their understanding of key Christian concepts into what was perceived as ‘Hindu’ terminology rather than use the so-called ‘Christian’ terminology that Protestant missionaries had attempted to invent. Although most of these terms have remained excluded from the Tamil Bible, they were incorporated into theological and literary discussions as theological terms that better denoted Christian concepts by emphasizing similarity rather than difference. By using the same terminology they

were signalling the commensurability between their previous and present religious traditions. Such commensurability was neither approved by Protestant missionaries nor accepted by the bulk of the Tamil Protestant community later in the twentieth century.

Other converts translated Christian concepts through literary and devotional genres. These were poets composing Christian hymns and epic poetry in Marathi (Narayan Waman Tilak 1861-1919), Tamil (Vetanayaka Sastri 1774-1864, H. A. Krishnapillai 1827-1900), Telugu (Purushothama Chaudhari 1803-1890) and Malayalam (Mosavalsalam Sastrikal 1847-1916).²⁴ Several of these, such as Cinnatambi Pillai, Rajah Bhujanga Rao, Mukunda Das, Evarts Kannagasabai, Saminatha Pillai, Ramachandra Valyabhushana translated sections of the prose translations of the available Bible versions into Oriya, Tamil, Telugu or Sanskrit verse. In such cases, translating Tamil or Telegu prose Bibles into complex verse forms within the same language, may not have entailed inter-lingual translation but a conceptual translation into the genres and idioms of each language considered sacred by more than one religious community. Given that missionary translators had made a concerted effort to keep out poetry from the Protestant discourse (including translations) in South Asia (see Israel 2011, Yelle 2012), it is important to recognize their translation across literary and religious genres as *translation* and as valid as missionary translations.

In the theological and literary writings of South Asian converts to Christianity (for instance, Brahmabandhav Upadhaya, A. J. Appasamy,²⁵ V. Chakkarai,²⁶) the term 'avatara' often features with reference to Christ in human form, a reminder of that other famous descent to human form, Krishna. This use of the term 'avatara' speaks both to the discourse on religion in India as well as to the perceived role of translation. In their repeated use of a term that had been left out of Indian language translations of the Bible, these Christian converts were signalling a conceptual link to an existing parallel Hindu belief but were not claiming equivalence between Christ and Krishna. Avatara had been rejected by Bible translators as a term that did not sufficiently or clearly distinguish the Christian theology underpinning the incarnation of Christ from the human manifestations of divinity observed in other religious traditions. Instead, the many 'avatars' of Vishnu were rejected as signs of polytheism.²⁷ Theological word lists drawn by Protestant missionaries avoided the word Avatara. See for instance, Horace H. Wilson's entry on 'incarnation' (1830) where he thinks it would be most appropriate to use "derivates from the words meaning body" and recommends '*manusharūp*' [lit. form of man] but makes no mention of 'avatara.' Yelle (2012) rightly points to parallels in British attitudes to language and religion: "Some British Protestants regarded the profusion of Hindu languages and ceremonies in the same way that they regarded the proliferation of Hindu images, as forms of gross polytheism. The reformation of language would, accordingly, represent the triumph of Christian monotheism" (26). The term 'polytheism' often used pejoratively in nineteenth-century missionary speak, advocating the move from polytheism to

monotheism as a move from uncivilized savagery to civilization, was robustly rejected by Hindu apologists who argued that the several gods were only ‘interpretations’ or (‘translations’?) of the many uncontainable aspects of the one God. The many attributes of the absolute divine consciousness are believed to be manifested in a separate god or goddess, each taking on a different form, body and name. Each higher god in the Hindu pantheon can appear in many *avatars*, each complementing rather than competing with each other in their reiteration of divine attributes. The supposed proliferation into the many gods denotes making visible the implicit qualities present in the one god. By using the term *avatara* for Christ, as a human manifestation of the trinity, Christian converts were blurring the distinctions that missionary translators sought to maintain between Christianity and other religions.

Further, and significantly, there is a secondary meaning of the term *avataram* in the Sanskrit which offers an interesting insight into the different conceptualisations of translation in South Asia discussed in the previous section. *Avataram* is also another term for translation. That the better-known sense of the term incarnation of a deity also doubles up as translation allows us to open up the current examination of different conceptions of translation even further. *Avataram* suggests a different way of conceptualising the relationship between the ‘translation’ and its ‘original.’ Here, we re-encounter the idea of translation as the visible, manifest, physical form of invisible meanings. The roots of the word indicating descent, entrance and/or crossing a threshold, suggest an openness to change in form, language and location. Just as there can be many incarnations of the one divine being, where each highlights a different attribute of the divine and each presents as divine and valid manifestations, it is also possible to arrive at multiple translations, each different, each highlighting fresh aspects of the one source text. ‘*Avataram* as translation’—makes visible in translation aspects that may have remained obscured in the source or initiating text.

What does a view of translation approached not as equivalence but as multiple, dispersed, manifesting different meanings, as ‘*avataram*’ bring to the discussion on conversion to Christianity? Translation need not depend on the presence or absence of equivalence. By implication, all translations cannot be evaluated according to rules of equivalence since all translators involved in the complex interaction between missionary translations and translations by converts to Christianity were not conceptualising translation in the same way. Rather we have seen that claims of equivalence are constructed to serve translation projects to fulfil specific purposes, often to support some translations as ‘Christian’ and reject others as not. Several translation studies scholars, as Pym observes (2010: 40,) have emphasized the “social function of equivalence as a shared illusion” but if we compare approaches to translation across different religious cultures, equivalence is no longer as useful a tool to assess translation as it compels the relation between source and translation into a unidirectional dyad, locked together by the paradigm of this shared illusion. For some translators, equivalence is not significant or meaningful simply because it is not

attributed any cultural value, so we need to take into account a multi-directional, conglomerate of texts, functioning as a compound, relating to each other in ever-changing hierarchies, manifesting different attributes and highlighting different networks of social meaning at different historical junctures.²⁸ This does not mean jettisoning equivalence altogether. Instead this implies that we bear in mind that although missionary translation and linguistics may well have operated on the basis of equivalence, the response from converts to Christianity was not always organised along the same plane. Their response, whether compliant or resistant to missionary translation, should not then be measured against the paradigm of equivalence as the default definition of translation.

The response from converts to Christianity—whether this is writing theological commentary, autobiographical narratives of conversion, or devotional poetry—needs to be recognised as ‘translation’ as much as the Bible translation projects undertaken by missionaries. When converts to Christianity write about their new Christian faith using the idioms and registers of their previous religious affiliations, and when they use the term ‘avatara’ for Christ’s incarnation, they also signal their authority to offer interpretations and translations of their understanding of Christian theology across a range of textual genres that speak both to Hindu and Christian audiences. They choose not to replace Hindu terminology with equivalent Christian meanings or invent new terms to indicate Christian meanings but use Hindu terms as *Hindu* terms with their long histories of philosophical meaning in Hindu contexts, to speak about their god. This leads to a linguistic blurring or confusion that they choose to exploit. Their requisitioning of ‘avatara’ calls attention to the deep-seated discomfort with proliferation that has been implicit in Protestant Christianity and further its implications for translations undertaken by Christian converts: that texts, meanings and gods need not be contained and fixed but can be permitted to refract into an explosion of differences. Theirs is not an inadvertent challenge to missionary translation (as in the case of Tagalog misinterpretations that Rafael 1993 argues) nor even an attempt to supply alternative equivalences in spontaneous, ritual translation acts by way of comparing several Bible translations (Handman 2010) but a deliberate re-use of existing **religious** terminology, genre and theology to signal their right to translate beyond and around the primary task of Bible translation. Rather than dismissing the work of converts to Christianity as not fitting the mark as translations, or reading them only against the gauge of equivalence, their work will need to be recognized as challenging the very application of equivalence to appraise their translation.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the different conceptualisations of translation at play offer stimulating ways to study how the categories of religions and conversion to Christianity have been framed in the South Asian context. I have tried to demonstrate

the extent to which our working definition of translation influences our understanding of how religions are viewed. I suggest that in translation situations where individual lexical terms are re-assigned new semantic values to distinguish acceptable from non-acceptable forms of religious practice and beliefs, it is important to analyse the discourse on translation as a governing structure that informs the conditions within which linguistic or conceptual equivalence are applied to translations undertaken by all religious traditions.

However, at any given point and within any religious community there may be a number of competing conceptualizations of translation at play. I should point out in conclusion that because of my particular interest here in the connections between the phenomena of translation and religious conversion, I have chosen to examine translation conceptions and practice in the light of metaphors of the sacred. Exploring other metaphors for translation would be equally valid in order to investigate other materials and themes in translation. In this case, the term 'avatara' pointing both to reincarnations of the sacred and reincarnations of texts, felicitously serves the examination of the different ways in which relationships between 'originals' and 'translations' are conceptualised, thus challenging the use of a single normative definition of translation as equivalence to examine materials from a range of cultures and across historical time.

Within the cultural and intellectual contexts of Protestant Christian missions in India, translation as equivalence and as a carrying across of 'meaning' from one language to another is mostly emphasized and studied for its effects. Whatever the direction of translation, into or out of Indian languages, it is assumed that translation projects involved the construction of commensurable categories (in this case language and religion), so that the translator felt able to make the desired transfer of meaning between them. But focusing on the metaphors of equivalence and carrying across as the dominant or only translation metaphors allows us only to ask questions regarding whether and to what extent an extractable meaning can be carried across linguistic equivalents. Taking into account alternative definitions for translation operative contemporaneously in cultures at the 'receiving end' of Christian mission allow us instead to take into account that equivalence in fact held little traction for all translator-converts to Christianity. This line of enquiry opens up the current discourse regarding how and to what extent converts to Christianity mobilise translation to represent their religious conversion.

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² Paula Richman (1991)

³ William Carey, missionary in Serampore from 1793 and William Jones, in his preface to *A Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771; cited in Niranjana 1992) both comment on the non-dependability of Indians in matters of translation.

⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1963; Jonathan Smith comments on the academic study of religion as a “child of the Enlightenment” (1982: 104).

⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1963)

⁶ See Ines Zupanov for Jesuit translations in south India, Hephzibah Israel (2011) for a comparison of translation strategies by different Christian missions.

⁷ Anquetil-Duperron’s *Le Zend-Avesta* published in 1771; Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* (1879); see Bradley Herling, (2009) for a discussion of eighteenth-century German translations of the Bhagavita Gita.

⁸ See Chapter 7, Masuzawa 2005 and Molendijk 2016 for accounts of the multi-volume translation series and its role in the development of comparative religions.

⁹ See for detailed examination of the term Hinduism Will Sweetman 2003, Llewellyn 2005.

¹⁰ See Mitch Numark 2011.

¹¹ Carlos Lopez 2015.

¹² Also a term for the merchant caste. There is some ambiguity in Lord’s use of the term ‘banian’ as it could be read either as a reference to caste or religion.

¹³ “In order to explain the Genealogy [of the South Indian Deities] in a better way [than our European predecessors], we sent our questions to the Tamil people [i.e. knowledgeable representatives of professing and practicing adherents of a particular religion in the Tamil country] and requested them to given written replies with all of the relevant details. That is why we have written them many questions, which have answered truthfully and with detailed information. From their letters that have reached us from all sides, large portions are quoted in every chapter [of the Genealogy] partly to prove [particular point] and partly to explain [certain points] further....In the present work, the letters [of the Tamil people] are quoted extensively to elucidate their opinion on and the meaning of theological matters.” (Preface, 38)

¹⁴ In contrast, most branches of Christianity (and some more so than others) would insist that *all* Christians must undergo a process of conversion and confession of the faith regardless of their circumstances of birth: all must be baptised into the faith and church. In the fierce debate over conversion in nineteenth-century India, ‘baptism’ into Christianity generated contentious debates over the appropriate rituals for purifying returning Hindus, especially Brahmins. For example, see Dandekar (2018: 373-376) for one such controversy amongst many.

¹⁵ Jeffrolet, Christophe (2011), see chapter 7 in particular.

¹⁶ High-caste Lakshmi Bai Tilak’s (1868–1936) conversion account (published between 1934 and 1937) delineates her changing attitude to caste in detail after the conversion of her husband to Christianity. The conversion account of Baba Padmanji, for instance, records a particularly poignant conversation exchange with his father who asks him to follow his “convictions secretly at home” rather than make a public declaration through Christian baptism (Baba Padmanji, *Once Hindu, Now Christian The Early Life of Baba Padmanji, An Autobiography* ed. J. M. Mitchell, 1890: 102-104)

¹⁷ See Indira Viswanathan Peterson, ‘Appar: The Reformed Monk’, in *Poems to Siva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989: 283–301.

¹⁸ For detailed descriptions of social and physical moves in religious conversion, see collection of essays in special section entitled *Narratives of Transformation: Religious Conversion and Indian Traditions of ‘Life Writing’* in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, eds. Hephzibah Israel and John Zavos, 2018.

¹⁹ See Boyd (1969; 1974).

²⁰ I am grateful to James Underhill for bringing this aspect to my attention in an earlier draft of the paper.

²¹ See Israel (2011) chapter 4.

²² Israel 2018.

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- ²³ For a discussion of the difficulties of working with the languages of the missionary archive see Israel (forthcoming) 'Translation Traces in the Archive: Unfixing documents, destabilising evidence,' *The Translator*.
- ²⁴ There is likewise a rich body of Islamic literature in Indian languages, presenting Islamic concepts and prophetic traditions in Indian language poetry. For translations into Tamil, see Ronit Ricci (2011); for Tamil compositions of biographies of the Prophet Mohammad in the literary mode of the *Iramavataram*, Kamban's Tamil Ramayana, see Vasudha Narayanan (2001).
- ²⁵ Appasamy uses the term "purna Avatara" in *The Gospel and India's Heritage*, London: SPCK, 1942, p. 209.
- ²⁶ V. Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1930.
- ²⁷ Theological word lists avoid the word Avatara. See for instance, Horace H. Wilson's entry on 'incarnation' in *Remarks Upon the Rendering in Sanscrit of Theological Terms as proposed by the Rev. W.H. Mill*, p. 30 where he thinks it would be most appropriate to use "derivates from the words meaning body" and recommends 'manusharup' [lit. form of man] but makes no mention of 'avatara.'
- ²⁸ This may seem akin to poststructuralist conceptions of intertextuality and translation but I do not want to draw this analogy here as there are important differences that I cannot describe fully in an article of this length.